

# EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING MUSIC TO STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

by  
Catharine Ahls

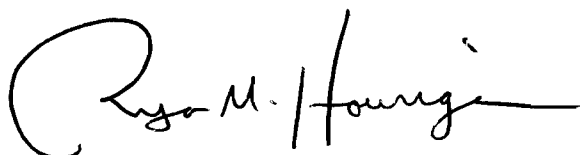
Advised by  
Dr. Ryan Hourigan

RUNNING HEAD: TEACHING MUSIC TO STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

Effective Strategies for Teaching Music to Students with Autism

Catharine A. Ahls

Thesis Advisor  
Ryan M. Hourigan

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ryan M. Hourigan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

HONRS 499  
December, 2007  
Ball State University  
Muncie, IN

Expected Date of Graduation  
May, 2008

SpColl  
Thesis  
LD  
2400  
124  
2014  
A46

## Effective Strategies for Teaching Music to Students with Autism

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of music teachers who teach music to children with autism through a case study of a music educator with significant experience in this field. This study answers the following questions: a) what are the challenges faced by inservice music teachers who teach music to children with autism and b) what types of effective accommodations do music teachers who teach children with autism use?

A qualitative case study was used in this investigation. This study included observations in five elementary music classes at a Midwest school to examine the strategies used by a music educator to include students with autism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a public school elementary music teacher. The paper outlines specific strategies to adapt music instruction for students with autism that were effective in the music classroom. These strategies are included under the following categories: a) daily routines and transitions, b) visual cues, c) proximity, d) developing social skills, e) simplification, f) environmental conditions g) communication with other professionals, and h) personal professional growth.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Ryan Hourigan for advising me throughout this project and proofing my paper for technical and structural errors. He was a very large inspiration and extremely helpful throughout the entire process.

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING MUSIC TO STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

According to the Autism Society of America (2007), autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability, measuring a 10-17% annual growth. 90 billion dollars are spent annually on this disability and 90% of these costs stem from adult services. However, the cost of lifelong care can be reduced by two thirds with an early diagnosis and intervention.

Damer (2001) outlines how the law has shaped education for children with special needs since the Education of the Handicapped Act was passed in 1975. PL-94-142 mandated that all “handicapped” children be provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. This formerly accepted terminology was later reevaluated and amended in subsequent acts. The act also mandated that schooling was to meet the guidelines of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in which the student’s placement would be evaluated within a particular timeline by a specified team. All efforts to involve the parents are to be documented. Finally, the law banned the use of any discriminatory measures of assessment to identify “handicapped” children. In 1986, the law was amended to address the needs of children from birth until age 2 in the case that early intervention is necessary.

While this law was one step towards providing the best public education possible to all students, there was still much more legislation that changed the landscape of the education of persons with disabilities. A new law was enacted in 1990 entitled the Americans with Disabilities Act. The act prohibited the exclusion of any individuals with disabilities from public services or any other organization that provides public accommodations of any kind. Finally, during the same year, the Education of the

Handicapped Act was amended under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and changed the perception of students with special needs by using person-first terminology, instead of referring to an individual as a disability. Under this law, autism was officially specified as a disability, qualifying children with autism for the best public education possible and any accommodations necessary to achieve this under IDEA.

It is critical that students with autism are provided the best education possible, including making appropriate accommodations to successfully include students with autism in regular classrooms if at all possible. A student's abilities or disabilities should not affect the quality of their education. However, there is little research suitable for inservice teachers offering possible strategies for adapting music instruction to meet the needs of exceptional students in the music classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of music teachers who teach music to children with autism through a case study of a music educator with significant experience in this field. This study will answer the following questions: a) what are the challenges faced by inservice music teachers who teach music to children with autism? and b) what types of accommodations are used by music teachers who teach children with autism?

### Review of Literature

Since the law mandated public schools to provide a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities, education is becoming more and more geared towards inclusion. Music teachers need to have a strong understanding of how to most effectively include children with autism. Armstrong and Darrow (1999) not only describe the impact of federal regulations on educating children with disabilities, but also cite the characteristics of autism. Autism is a

developmental disability characterized by impairment in both verbal and nonverbal communication, resistance to environmental change, excessive attachment to small objects, and isolated areas of ability. A person with autism may also engage in repetitive activities and stereotypic movements.

Adamek and Darrow (2005) also further describe more specific characteristics of autism. Students with autism may have difficulty verbally communicating and as a result may use more nonverbal forms of communication. Some students may be highly echolalic, repeating words or phrases several times, while other students may appear to be completely unresponsive to verbal cues or directions. Most children will suffer from difficulty with social interaction and resist change. Finally, many students with autism may use very minimal eye contact or seem particularly attached to small inanimate objects.

Several studies cite music's impact on students with autism. Research by Armstrong and Darrow (1999) indicates that these students may demonstrate a unique sensitivity and ability in music compared to other academic areas. For example, they may demonstrate an especially strong sense of rhythm or ability to imitate pitch. In addition to this, the authors summarize several studies suggesting a strong correlation between music and task accuracy. One such study demonstrated that four male children with autism successfully sorted 60% more color chips into color-coded boxes when music was being played in the background as opposed to no music being played in the background during the task. The article also suggested that music is an effective motivator and reinforcer in behavior modification treatment plans for students with autism.

Armstrong and Darrow explain that research on music and autism has many implications for music educators. This includes a brief summary of the advantages of participation in inclusive school music classes for students with autism such the opportunity for nonverbal classroom performance, socialization, and the impact of musical structure and organization on such students.

While this article is an excellent source to gain an understanding of why music is so significant for students with autism, it did not discuss effective strategies that music teachers use to more effectively include these students in the regular music classroom. The authors admit that new research is becoming a necessity due to the fact that the population of students with autism entering regular music classrooms is growing. Preservice teachers are taught how important it is to offer the best education they can to every student. However, there is simply a lack of significant research in this area.

Graham (2001) describes the use of music therapy and mathematics as a means of “opening and to a degree sustaining a communicative relationship” (p. 46). However, this philosopher’s conviction stopped at just this. The author compared the use of mathematics as a means to foster communication between two “autistic twins” with the practice and practicality of music therapy. While these observations reinforced the practicality of music therapy for students with autism, they fell short of the significant potential benefits that music education has to offer students with autism. The author failed to address the implications for music educators that will work with students with autism on a regular basis.

In addition to this, Graham is inconsistent with that of today’s acceptable language, referring to a student with autism as the autistic student. This vocabulary does



not recognize the student as an individual and implies that it is appropriate to define them by their disability. This is the very reason that the Education of the Handicapped Act was amended to use more person-first language. The article also uses the formerly appropriate term *idiot savant* to describe students with autism that achieve extraordinarily strong abilities in specialized areas such as math, art, or music. In short, this article exemplifies the very type of thinking that effective music educators should strive to surpass and overcome. Not only does the law mandate it, but also effective educators should work towards providing the best and most equal education they can for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

#### Other Relevant Practitioner Literature

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Adamek (2001) writes about music teachers learning to teach students with special needs to the best of their ability by holding to four major principles: partial participation, normalization, interdependence, and individuality. Her article, *Meeting Special Needs in Music Class* describes these four principles in depth. Partial participation refers to the belief that the student can benefit from participation in some aspects of an activity, even if the disability prevents them from full participation. Normalization is the value that students should have an educational experience as close to that of students without disabilities. Interdependence is the belief that all students benefit from communication, cooperation, and developing relationships with others in the community and classroom. Finally, Adamek refers to individuality as the appreciation of each student as a person with “specific needs and skills upon which to base the best possible educational strategies.”

This article implies that the only way to provide the most effective education possible for each student, regardless of his or her disabilities, it is critical to uphold these four principles. Learning about each student with a disability by reading their Individualized Education Plan is one of the first steps towards developing a critical voice based on these four principles.

Adamek expanded her position on teaching students with special needs by offering practical means of adapting music instruction for these students. The author's general suggestions included: a) adapting the extent of participation to which the students is involve; b) altering the level of difficulty of a task for the student; c) increasing the level of support; d) using multiple instructional strategies to deliver instruction; e) allowing more kinds of responses during instruction; f) adapting the goals or expected outcomes of an activity; g) and allowing the student to use alternative materials. While these general categories of adaptations may not be specifically geared for students with Autism, many of these concepts are applicable. These broad categories can be applied in any situation involving students with disabilities. These ideas are starting points, but only experience will enable the music teacher to use these principles to pinpoint the specific adaptations effective for individual students with autism.

Hammel (2004) notes the extreme implications for music educators in regards to the movement towards inclusion in American public education. The author discusses the significance of communication in order to understand and know students better. This includes studying the student's IEP and communicating with other teachers, administrators, or counselors that have worked with the student. Other valuable resources for the music teacher include the special education faculty, paraprofessionals,

and the school administration. All of these people should be considered members of the team and can greatly influence your approach towards teaching by offering valuable insight regarding their experiences with students with special needs.

Hammel also includes several suggestions and specific adaptations that can be used in the music classroom. The classroom setup should be organized and safe. Simple adaptations can be made for students with visual or hearing impairments by seating them closer to the front. The music teacher can also facilitate better classroom management with seating charts to create more stability. Other physical adaptations can be implemented to help students with more physical impairments to succeed in the music classroom such as ribbons to help the student grasp equipment. In addition to these suggestions, the author notes the balancing act between providing consistency for students with disabilities while stressing that it is often important to provide flexibility for these students at the same time. She suggests notifying students of changes in the classroom ahead of time to help prepare them for it and giving students with disabilities some form of visual representation of the lesson plan each day.

While both the Adamek and Hammel articles provide excellent strategies for inclusion and ways to adapt instruction for students with special needs, neither article addresses the specific challenges that may arise when teaching students autism. Throughout research, there is relatively little work focusing on this specific disability despite the fact that it is becoming one of the most common disabilities in public schools today.

Adamek and Darrow (2005) deal specifically with “Students with Communication Disabilities: Autism and other Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and Speech and

Language Disorders” in chapter nine of *Music in Special Education*. This is one of the few sources directly pertaining to this topic. The authors describe the qualitative impairments in communication and social skills that are typical of students with autism or other ASD. Due to sensory integration problems, the environment may be “confusing, painful, or frightening” because their sense of vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell are not working properly together.

This type of information is very useful to a music educator trying to understand why certain strategies may work with other students with disabilities and not with students with autism. This developmental disorder is drastically unique and requires special attention in order to meet each student's individual needs. The author correlates specific adaptations with specific symptoms and characteristics of autism. Some of the communicative adaptations that the author includes for students with this disability are the use of a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or other forms of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). Other less drastic measures of adaptation include the use of visual cues to reinforce directions and rules, modeling behavior and movement, and using visual representations of planned activities.

In addition to addressing communication in the music classroom with children with autism, Adamek and Darrow also discuss the challenges that arise regarding proper social interaction. While some children with autism may have difficulty even making eye contact with peers, others may appear overly clingy. The common thread is that students with autism have difficulty seeing others' perspectives. Some strategies to help teach these students appropriate social behaviors include direct instruction by prompting or questioning the students, modeling, physically assisting students, using social

communication training by teaching students to ask questions in social settings, implementing social stories in the music classroom, and teaching the rules of social play through leisure skills.

Finally, Adamek and Darrow summarize strategies to manage difficult behaviors that are typical of students with autism in the music classroom. Keeping a daily routine that is familiar to the student may be a strong preventative measure of difficult behaviors stemming from a resistance to change. Positive reinforcement of good behavior is another preventative measure. The authors listed several general principles such as adapting goals or activities to suite the child's needs. Finally, Adamek and Darrow reinforced the necessity of consistently studying and following the student's IEP.

Research on music and students with disabilities has taken several steps towards inclusion in the music classroom. However, specific information regarding major disorders is lacking, specifically pertaining to adapting music instruction for students with autism. *Music in Special Education* is excellent book for practicing teachers to consult. The in depth explanation of how behaviors and characteristics of autism can shape the child's music education is extremely valuable.

It is critical that students with autism are provided the best education possible, including making appropriate accommodations to successfully include students with autism in regular classrooms if at all possible. There is little research suitable for inservice teachers offering possible strategies for adapting music instruction to meet the needs of exceptional students in the music classroom. This case study not only serves as a detailed analysis of the various strategies and adaptations suggested by other practitioners, but also examines the practicality of other adaptations and methods in light

of these practitioners' publications. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of music teachers who teach music to children with autism through a case study of a music educator with significant experience in this field. This study will answer the following questions: a) what are the challenges faced by practicing music teachers who teach music to children with autism and b) what types of accommodations are used by music teachers who teach children with autism?

### Methods and Procedures

#### *Data*

This case study included a detailed observation of five elementary general music classes containing one or more students with autism. The observation protocols (see appendix A) are meant to develop an understanding of a) the practitioner's experience working with children with disabilities, specifically students with autism, and b) to achieve a clear idea of how the practitioner's perception of working with these students has changed, including the types of strategies that are effective in adapting music instruction for students with autism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a public school elementary music teacher. The interview was recorded on tape and six pages of single spaced transcripts were provided. The interview protocols (see appendix B) were developed to record contextual information regarding the observations and other background information for a clearer understanding and interpretation of the qualitative data.

#### *Research Sites*

The kindergarten class that I observed contained nineteen students, one of which with autism. No paraprofessionals were present to aid the student in the classroom during

this lesson. The objective of this lesson was for students to demonstrate their ability to play various percussive instruments including the drums, jingle bells, shakers, and rhythm sticks to accompany a written story.

The first grade class that I observed contained eighteen students, two of which with autism. Again, no paraprofessionals were present in this class. The objective this lesson remained consistent with that of the kindergarten class. In addition to this, the students reviewed music for their upcoming holiday program.

The second grade class that I observed contained one student with autism and several other students with various disabilities in a class of twenty-five. Two paraprofessionals were present to aid these students. This lesson opened with a bean-bag movement song and activity to help students use up any excess energy and focus on music. The objective of this lesson was to demonstrate the students' ability to recognize and repeat rhythms through a drum passing song and activity. After the drum passing activity, the class practiced hand movements with songs that they had learned in a previous lesson.

In grade five, I observed one student with autism in a class of twenty-two students. The objective of the lesson for this class was to learn to play mallet instruments. The students also reviewed more holiday program music and finished by listening to a Halloween monster medley. No paraprofessionals were present to aid in the classroom.

The last class that I observed was a sixth grade class of fifteen students, including one student with autism. Several other students in this class have special needs that are detailed on their IEP. The objective of the this lesson was to practice reading music on

bell sets including whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and rests. The class also had an opportunity to practice improvisation through a call and response activity.

### Findings

#### *Unique Characteristics of Children with Autism in Music Classrooms*

The kindergarten student with autism communicated primarily through nonverbal gestures, such as pointing at objects in conjunction with saying one representative word. The student with autism seemed to have difficulty focusing and staying on task, repeatedly dazing off or becoming distracted. During the interview, the music teacher noted the first grade student's profound improvement in his ability to focus for longer lengths of time during music instruction over the past few months. In addition to this, he struggled with following sequences of movements to familiar songs. The student demonstrated minimal interaction with his peers, unless approached by another student. He gave very little eye contact in these instances.

Both students with autism in the first grade lacked an understanding of appropriate physical boundaries with peers, constantly hovering or touching other students. This physical expression appeared to be one of these student's primary means of communication. However, it was evident that other students in the class were not comfortable with this. The other student with autism primarily communicated with short, one-word phrases in conjunction with pointing at an object, similar to the students in the previous kindergarten class. Neither student was very independent.

One student wanted to sit in a chair, but would not touch it until the teacher physically positioned the chair for him. He stood near it pointing at the chair,



repeating the word 'chair' or 'mine' several times. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

The music teacher noted that this is a common scenario with this particular student in almost every class because this student appears to be afraid and uncomfortable of sitting on the floor.

The student with autism in the second grade seemed to be much more independent in comparison to the other students with autism that were observed at this school. The teacher informed me that this student is exceptionally bright and has achieved a high ability level in music. As a result, this student can't deal with imperfection.

Teachers don't mark anything wrong on his class work. They just put a little red dot on it instead of a big red X. He really has a problem with perfection and has a very high IQ. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

This student also struggles with an extreme deficit in social skills and interaction. This student appeared to use more verbal communication, but often became overly excited. He became abnormally frustrated when other students in the class made mistakes.

The student tried to grab the drum after a girl near him made an error. He frequently yelled instructions to the class, asking which students had had a turn. It seems like he likes to have a lot of control and attention. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

The fifth grade student with autism was very well musically developed compared to the other students with autism. The music teacher noted that his enrollment in piano

lessons greatly impacted his musical ability level because he had a clearer understanding of the notes and rhythms and demonstrated a strong sense of time. This student had an obvious affinity for music as he often danced and moved in the style of the melody throughout the lesson. This student seemed to communicate emotions by nonverbal, physical movement.

When he became frustrated he would often rock back and forth or wave his arms. In addition to this, he often danced to the mood and style of music throughout the class. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

This student also greatly resists change. During the interview, the music educator discussed his tendency to become very upset when a song is not played the entire way through.

The student with autism in the sixth grade seemed very echolalic, repeating very short phrases several times. The music teacher noted that this student struggles with processing instructions and executing fine motor activities. Similar to other students with autism, when the student was less successful with a task, he expressed his frustration through nonverbal communication, rocking back and forth and shaking his arms.

During an improvisation activity, this student began shaking his arms and appeared to become very frustrated. The teacher ensured the class that ‘nothing they play can be wrong while improvising. There are just different ideas.’ When the student with autism understood this concept, he seemed much more disinhibited and allowed himself to enjoy the activity more. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

### *Routines and Transitions*

Familiar routines helped this teacher create stability in the music classroom.

Based on my observations, another way to maintain stability in the music classroom for students with autism is to consistently use familiar attention grabbers and patterns.

The teacher used attention-grabbing techniques during the second grade lesson to regain the attention of the class and the students with autism. The teacher cued the students by saying a rhythm. Immediately the students repeated this rhythm as signal of their attention. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

This appeared to be a very effective way to regain the attention of all of the students, especially the students with disabilities because it used positive reinforcement rather than yelling above noise. This consistent procedure also seemed to provide stability for these students.

Other strategies for keeping the student with autism in the fifth grade class focused included preparing him for transitions in between activities with clear and simple instructions. When transitions approached, the teacher reminded the students how to handle equipment and gave instructions regarding how to quietly prepare for the next activity.

The teacher reminded the fifth grade students where to carefully place their mallet instruments at the end of the activity. Before they put away their equipment, the teacher told the students to quietly sit in their chair and wait for the next instructions. This seemed to prevent a chaotic transition and kept the room organized after using larger musical equipment. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

*Visual Cues*

Visual cues and hand movements were also very useful in aiding students with autism during music instruction. The music educator would often use hand motions to mimic lyrics as a reminder of words or use other hand gestures while talking to provide a visual representation of spoken directions. The students with autism also responded well when the teacher gave them visual cues such as pointing to them when it was their turn.

The primary visual adaptations used in the kindergarten lesson included several cues and gestures to aid the student in playing his instrument or to indicate where or how the student was to move. The student responded especially well to the visual cues such as pointing towards an instrument when it is to be played and mimicking lyrics with hand motions as a reminder of the words.

The music teacher continued to use visual cues in the first grade lesson. While practicing the holiday program music, the teacher used hand signals and motions to mimic the length of notes and follow the melodic contour. Both students with autism responded very well to these strategies and seemed to follow instructions more closely with these visual cues. The following example from my observation notes provides other techniques that the music teacher incorporated in the lesson.

The teacher used several visual cues in the first grade class to aid both students with autism throughout the lesson. While directing the class to stand in a circle, the music teacher drew a visual representation of the shape with her finger in the air. She continued to use visual cues to remind the students when to play their instruments during the story. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

In addition to these classes, the music teacher used these visual cues and hand movements to aid the students with disabilities in the second grade class during the story

and holiday music. This was a very effective strategy because it not only aided the students with disabilities, but it also helped reinforce the lyrics and musical concepts for other students that were not struggling as much.

### *Proximity*

One of the major areas that the fifth grade student with autism struggled with was staying focused on the task at hand. The teacher would use strategies such as asking for eye contact before moving on. Another preventative measure that the teacher took was to keep this student in close proximity. This had a very large impact on the students with autism. Despite their disability, children will be children.

When the teacher was closer by the fifth grade student with autism, this student seemed to stay on task more easily. Using proximity as an instructional strategy seemed to be very effective in this class. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

It may be that he simply needed someone to hold him accountable for his actions or serve as a reminder to stay focused. Also, other students near the child with autism seemed to offer a helping hand when he wasn't following instructions. This allowed the teacher to more easily address the student's needs during music instruction.

### *Social Skills*

Music provides many excellent opportunities for students to develop and reinforce social skills. This teacher made use of many group activities to help students with autism practice taking turns and sharing. The call and response activity also provided a way for the students with autism to nonverbally communicate their response to a melody and mimic the format of a typical conversation: question and answer.

The drum passing activity used in the second grade class was not only an effective method to informally assess how students were grasping a particular musical concept without placing a lot of additional pressure on the student to perform a formal playing test, but also the passing game helped reinforce social skills in the student with autism, such as sharing and waiting your turn.

There were a couple of moments when the student appeared to become impatient. However, the student was making an obvious effort to practice these proper social skills in the context of this activity. This activity seemed to provide an appropriate challenge for this student with autism because he had to practice taking turns and sharing the spotlight. (Observation notes, October, 2007).

### *Simplification of Ideas*

Simplifying a complicated process can help a student with autism reach a higher level of success. For example, one strategy that the teacher used to simplify the use of playing mallet instruments in the fifth grade class was to have the students read the notes aloud with her before the additional complication of using instruments.

When the music educator read the note names aloud with the class before they played the bells, the student with autism seemed to focus more on the location of the pitches on the instrument rather than worrying about interpreting a complex symbol system. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

The student with autism in the sixth grade also became very frustrated while playing on the bell set. When the class read the notes aloud before playing through exercises, this student seemed very capable of completing the task. However, he seemed

to experience difficulty transferring the visual representation of the pitches on the page to the actual pitches on the instrument.

The teacher aided the student by singing the note names aloud to the student while he was playing, in addition to pointing to the notes on the page. This strategy allowed the student to focus more on the instrument instead of worrying about converting the note head symbols to the keys on the instrument. (Observation notes, October, 2007).

This student responded very well to this type of individual instruction when he had difficulty understanding spoken directions amidst a group. The teacher offered positive reinforcement when the student experienced success.

Instrument selection is another means that this teacher uses to implement simplicity in her music classroom. This teacher encouraged students with severe cases of autism that may inhibit their ability to perform complex motor tasks to perform on more percussive instruments rather than recorder or other fine-motor wind instruments. In her experience, this allows them to experience a greater degree of success because students are more able to focus on utilizing their musical talents rather than memorizing complex sequences and fingerings.

A lot of the limitations are physical. In addition to focusing on their coordination and motor skills, they have to look at the music and notes. It's too much. I also feel like they need to be learning. That is why I like the drums. They can focus more on the drumstick and rhythm...There is a little less to concentrate on and they can be successful at some level. That is what my goal is. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

Simplicity can also be applied to classroom rules and management. During the interview, this teacher commented on the fact that her classroom rules are very simple.

All that students have to remember is that they need to be ready when I am ready, they keep their hands and feet to themselves, and no talking when the teacher or other students are talking. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

Long lists can be confusing and difficult for students with autism to process. This simple set of rules is easy to follow and boils down to one simple concept: respect. The teacher noted that compared to other classrooms with more strict environments and long lists of rules, students with autism or other disabilities tend to demonstrate more inappropriate behavior than in classrooms with fewer and more simple rules.

#### *Environmental Conditions*

Setting up an environment in which the other students are more receptive towards each other, regardless of their abilities and disabilities is another key to including students with autism in the regular music classroom. This is easier today because students are more used to inclusive classrooms compared to fifty years ago. Students are more likely to pair up and help each other out when they have a better understanding of the situation.

They recognize that the child is not intentionally being disruptive. It is just something they need help with and students need to be more receptive to each other. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

If the teacher is able to foster a more accepting environment in the classroom, students are less likely to be bothered by the typical characteristics of autism. For example, this music teacher often deals with students with autism that have difficulty sitting still. In her experience, allowing them to get up and move around if it is



something that they need in order to regain focus, it is more beneficial than harmful. In a more accepting environment, other students in the classroom will be more receptive if they have a clearer understanding of the situation.

### *Communication With Other Professionals*

Aside from in class adaptations and instructional strategies for students with autism, there are many effective approaches that will better enable the music educator to provide the best education possible for each student. In the experience of this music educator, communication with other classroom teachers and paraprofessionals has played a large role in the education of students with autism.

The paraprofessionals present in the second grade class seemed to intervene when the student with autism was on the verge of becoming overly excited or frustrated.

In one instance, the student attempted to forcefully grab the drum from another student when he thought that she had made a mistake. The paraprofessionals were able to quickly address this issue by calmly reminding him to wait his turn. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

They were also able to help the student when he overextended physical boundaries with other students. The paraprofessionals were very helpful because they enabled the lesson to continue more fluently, with fewer disruptions.

The student constantly touched and hovered over other students. They gently physically assisted the student with these physical boundaries or they reminded him how to behave with short, verbal instructions. (Observation notes, October, 2007)

Strong communication with other professionals can also help prepare students with autism for change or to meet their goals. For example, one fifth grade student with autism holds a strong conviction for joining beginning band. The music teacher spoke with the beginning band director to arrange weekly visits to the band room.

We went over there for the last five or six weeks and would sit back in the percussion area. He loves going over and talking to the director. Those kinds of things are really good. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

This helps the student become more familiar with the teacher and percussion equipment that he will eventually be working with. It also creates more stability for the student with autism because it is an opportunity to become more comfortable with the new situation, rather than being overwhelmed by such a large change in his musical instruction.

### *Personal Growth*

Finally, one of the best ways to help students with autism in the music classroom is to seek personal growth. The music educator in this study noted the dramatic increase of students with autism in regular classrooms.

In the last five years, all of the sudden we were seeing so many more students with autism in the regular classroom. So, everybody was screaming, 'Hey, what gives here!'...This is the first year that our staff is receiving autism training. It is coming a little late, but better late than never. (Interview notes, October, 2007)

Despite the fact that this training in the school is not mandatory for all teachers, the music teacher finds it extremely valuable. Anytime an opportunity to learn about

common disabilities presents itself, teachers should take advantage of it, especially if they are not seeking out opportunities like this on their own.

### *Conclusion*

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability. Early intervention and quality educational experiences can drastically influence the life of a student with autism. The law has gradually been amended since 1975 to recognize the rights of certain students with disabilities. However, students with autism were first recognized under IDEA in 1990. The inclusion of students with autism in regular classrooms is becoming more common than ever before. In order for music teachers to meet the needs of the growing population of students with autism, more research is needed to guide their instruction. This study has evaluated the implementation of various instructional strategies for students with autism in the music classroom. Most importantly, it revealed a truth consistent with the philosophy from Adamek and Darrow's book, *Music in Special Education*. Each student is an individual with specific needs and abilities that equip the teacher to develop the best educational strategies possible. The best action that music educators can take is to seek out professional growth and learn how to effectively adapt their instruction for students with disabilities based on their needs and abilities.

## Appendix A: Observation Protocol

These prompts are based on the Observation Protocols for Self Contained Special Needs Classrooms in the *Handbook for The Beginning Music Teacher* (2006).

### **The Class**

How large is the class?

How many students with special needs are present?

Are any aides or paraprofessionals present in the class?

If so, how many are present?

Do they directly assist the students during class?

How independent is the student?

How does the student communicate?

### **Strategies and the Lesson**

What is the objective of the lesson?

What are the specific needs of the student that are being addressed in this lesson?

What are the visible structural and behavioral strategies that the teacher is using to meet these needs?

### **Student-Teacher and Student-Student Interaction**

How do the students with autism respond to the teacher and strategies?

How do the students with autism interact with other students in the class?

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

How many years have you taught?

When did you first start working with children with disabilities?

Have you had any preparation in learning to teach students with disabilities?

What is your relationship with the students' classroom teachers? Paraprofessionals?

How do you adapt your lesson for these students?

What type of behavioral and structural instructional strategies do you use to adapt music instruction for these students?

How have you been involved in the IEP process for these students?

What accommodations or adaptations have been successful/unsuccessful?

## References

- Adamek, M. S. (2001). Meeting special needs in music class. *Music Educators Journal*, 87(4), 23-26.
- Adamek, M. S. & Darrow, A. (2005). *Music in special education*. Silver Spring, MD: The American Music Therapy Association, Inc.
- Armstrong, T., & Darrow, A. (1999). Research on music and autism: Implications for music educators. *Update*, 18(1), 15-20.
- Autism Society of America. Facts and Statistics (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2007 from <http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=FactsStats>
- Damer, L. (2001). Inclusion and the law. *Music Educators Journal*, 87(4), 19-22.
- Graham, G. (2001). Music and autism. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35(2), 39-47.
- Hammel, A. (2004). Inclusion strategies that work. *Music Educators Journal*, 90(5), 33-37.
- Hourigan, R. M. (2006). Observation protocols for self contained special needs classrooms. In C. M. Conway and T. M. Hodgman, *Handbook for the beginning music teacher* (pp. 84-85). Chicago: GIA.